How Encounters with Values Generate Moral Demandingness

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An ethical philosophy that is properly responsive to, and based in, real human ethical experience will give an important and central place to the notion of encounters with values; to *epiphanies*, as they can also be called. Here I trace out some of the phenomenology involved. If I am right in my description, demandingness will be something that comes on us “from outside”; and something that we cannot fully control. The implications for our ordinary life are unsettling. But, despite what philosophers seem sometimes to assume, unsettlingness has never been a very reliable symptom of untruth.

(1) Values are *encountered*. We might almost say we bump into them. They come to us from outside; like tables and trees and tax-invoices, they are “just there”, waiting for us to notice them. As with tables, trees, and tax-invoices, we don’t *construct* values, or *infer* them from other, more basic or immediate objects of experience. We experience the values themselves, directly.

(2) We are passive relative to the values we encounter, not active. Their presence before us is none of our doing, except in the sense that what values we encounter may depend on which ways we direct our attention, just as a table’s presence before me may depend on which way I turn and which way I look.

(3) Values don’t come to us as any kind of function of our desires or preferences or overall aims, any more than trees we encounter come across to us as such a function. The values we encounter aren’t the way they are because we *want* them to be. It’s nice when they do match well with our wishes, our commitments and projects and life-plans. But it is perfectly possible and not at all uncommon for them not to.

(4) Any particular encounter with value has the highest possible degree of independence in its evidential force. Insofar as it is possible for a single encounter to have evidential force irrespective of its inferential connections (or lack thereof) to anything else, including any other encounter with value and any system of theory, any single encounter has this force.

(5) Values are no less transculturally available for encounter than tables, trees, and tax-invoices. They may also, as the case of tax-invoices reminds us, be no *more* transculturally available; though it seems natural to be more optimistic about transcultural availability with values than it is with tax-invoices. Likewise encounters with value are pervasively transculturally intelligible. We can mostly understand as such the responses to value of otherwise exceedingly alien cultures. (“Mostly”: certainly we cannot always, but the cases where we cannot are perhaps overdramatized by philosophical scepticism.)

(6) Values are not the proper object of any single sensory modality—but then neither are tables and trees and tax-invoices. One cannot be aware of values without being conditioned and disposed in the right sorts of way—but then the same is true of tables, trees, and tax-invoices. And in all four cases, the conditioning and disposing required is not especially recherché, and exceedingly widespread.

(7) Encounters with values, like encounters with tables, trees, and tax-invoices, are generally, though not always, such as to give rise to reasons to act. They are sometimes such that they *must* give rise to reasons to act. But then so, when other things are equal, are encounters with tables (when they’re about to fall on you), trees (when you’re about to drive into them), and tax-invoices (when they say “Pay this or go to prison”).

(8) Encounters with tables, trees and tax-invoices can be evidentially decisive, or as good as decisive: encounters of these sorts can be such as to leave us no serious room for doubt about the reality of what we have encountered. And they typically are, though there is also a small minority of borderline cases where there *is* serious doubt about the reality of the things encountered. Exactly parallel remarks apply for encounters with values.

(9) So much for analogies. Here, to close my list, is a *dis*analogy between the two kinds of encounter. Encounters with value can be (in Joyce’s term) *epiphanies*: revelations to us of something that founds, or that revolutionises, the whole way we see the world and think about value, our entire motivational and justificatory outlook; they can be moving, awesome, inspiring; they can give us a sense of the transcendent or the infinite. Encounters with tables, trees, tax-invoices, etc. cannot in this sense be epiphanies; except when they are also encounters with value.

Section I is not an argument; it is an outline phenomenological description. Arguments succeed when they move by valid steps from true premisses to true conclusions. Phenomenological descriptions succeed when they are **sincere**—when they are offered with a serious attempt at honesty, in good faith, and without conscious bias—when they are **accurate**—when they capture what our experience is actually like—and when they are **significant—**when what they sincerely and accurately capture is existentially central.

As to the sincerity of my reporting, all I can do is hope that my audience will give me that epistemic credit; as to its significance, judge for yourselves. As to its accuracy, there are various things I can do.

The first is the piece of hoping already referred to: I hope that what I say is familiar to the reader from her own experience. It had better be, given that phenomenological descriptions are meant to be quite general descriptions of human experience, to be the kind of thesis that, if advanced, everyone will agree to.

Secondly I can produce some examples that support and illustrate Section I’s nine-point phenomenology of value-encounter. I do that in Section III.

My first example features a tree: a plane tree, and the Persian king Xerxes. As Tom Holland tells the story in his popular history *Persian Fire* (London: Little, Brown 2005), p.239:

[I]f, as Xerxes had been raised to believe, the world was his to conquer, it was also his to mend. Keen horticulturalist that he was, he knew that a paradise, before it could be considered completed, first had to be cleared of weeds, set in order, beautified. Significantly, even embarking on a brutal campaign of destruction, Xerxes’ love of the natural world and his eye for its glories never left him. Nearing Sardis, for instance, he had come across a plane tree of such surpassing loveliness that he had halted the entire march of his army in admiration. One of [his bodyguard] the Immortals had been detached from the company and ordered to serve as its guard. Golden jewellery brought out from the expedition’s mobile treasure trove had been festooned from its sweeping branches. To be sure, the Great King took—but he also gave away.

Xerxes’ reaction to seeing something exceptionally beautiful—the plane tree—is to drop everything else he is doing (namely, marching an army of conquest off to invade Greece) and halt to contemplate it. It is as if, in the midst of his other preoccupations, he has become aware of the power and pull of a value that is presented to him, and changed course, temporarily at least, in response to that value.

Compare Section I’s checklist. Xerxes (1) encounters a value in encountering the tree, (2) whose presence before him is none of his doing, which (3) is no function of what Xerxes *already* wants, indeed stands in the way of his main current plans. His encounter with the tree (4) is an experience of value quite independent of any other thoughts or experiences of values that Xerxes may have. If anything, this independence becomes a rational embarrassment—the question “Why *this* beautiful tree particularly? Mustn’t he have seen lots of others equally beautiful?” is an obvious one about this story. (5) For all the vast cultural differences between us and him, what Xerxes does is readily intelligible to us. We too know from our own experience what it is like to be suddenly struck, (9) epiphanically, by the beauty of something and respond to it. (6) Xerxes’ encounter with the tree, and with its value, is perceptually cross-modal and (8) epistemically well-grounded. (7) Xerxes takes the tree to give him reasons to act, and acts on them; his resulting actions may strike us as bizarre, but they are not blankly incomprehensible.

I speak barely of *value-*encounter, not more qualifiedly of moral or aesthetic or spiritual/ religious value-encounter. Deliberately so. Quite simply, the beauty of the plane-tree is a reason to admire and not to destroy it. A moral reason? An aesthetic one? A religious/ spiritual one? I don’t see that we increase our understanding of the value of the tree by giving an answer to this question that finds a way of categorising the tree in exactly one of these categories.

Another reservation that I have about a standard way of talking about value of any of these sorts: it is hard to avoid talking of things like Xerxes’ plane tree as *instances* of value, or *loci* of value, or the like. Such phrases unfortunately suggest that the plane tree is as it were a receptacle containing an amorphous stuff, the stuff *value*, which like milk or dough could just as well be contained in other receptacles, and which perhaps comes in (measurable?) quantities. But the things do not *contain* the values, they *are* the values. Compare “valuable” with “important”. If I said the plane tree was important, there would be no temptation to see the tree as a receptacle for a stuff called importance, or look past the tree itself to the importance that it “contains”; we would see at once that this remark is about *the* *plane* *tree*, not about some feature that it happens to instantiate.

My second example, like my first, is deliberately taken from a social and psychological context as different from ours as possible. This example, which has elephants in it, is from Pliny the Elder.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In Pompey’s second consulship[55 BC], at the dedication of the temple of Venus Victrix, twenty elephants… fought in the Circus against a number of Gaetulians, who attacked them with javelins… But when the elephants had lost all hope of escape, they begged for mercy from the crowd by gestures which surpass all description, and with a kind of lamentation bewailed their wretched fate. So greatly were the people affected by the scene, that… the whole audience rose up in tears, and showered their curses on Pompey—which soon enough afterwards took their effect. (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 8.7, translated John Bostock, with alterations; cp. Cicero *Ad Familiares* 7.1)

The Romans’ capacity—including, implicitly, Pliny the Elder’s capacity—to enjoy the horrifying cruelty and senseless bloodshed of gladiatorial games is an unpleasant reality about them, just as our society’s taste for splatter-movies and gory video-games is an (only somewhat less) unpleasant reality about us. Both in their case and in ours, it is striking that this sort of blood-lust can be present in the very same people who are also clearly capable, almost simultaneously, of feeling sorry for wounded elephants. (Or at any rate, for *some* wounded elephants. Like the Xerxes case, this case raises a question about consistency; a parallel answer may be given.) I think this pity can be understood as value-encounter. In pitying the elephants, the crowd were—perhaps in spite of themselves, and certainly against the grain of their usual habits—recognising and responding to an encountered value.

But obviously humans kill animals all the time, and not all these killings are like gladiatorial killings. Other kinds of killing prompt other kinds of value-encounter. One example, from J.M.Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, involves humanely putting dogs down, in an operation that Coetzee implicitly compares with Auschwitz, in a stray-animal pound:

Sunday has come again. He and Bev Shaw are engaged in one of their sessions of *Lösung.* One by one he brings in the cats, then the dogs: the old, the blind, the halt, the crippled, the maimed, but also the young, the sound—all those whose time has come. One by one Bev touches them, pats them, speaks to them, comforts them, and puts them away, then stands back and watches while he seals up the remains in a black plastic shroud.

He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love. (J.M.Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp.218-9)

Part of what happens to the “he” of this passage, David Lurie, through the events in Coetzee’s novel is that he learns to see animals properly. One striking thing about David Lurie’s encounters with animal value, as this passage brings out, is that they are indeed something that he *learns*. Bev Shaw sees a kind of value in stray dogs and cats that need putting down that David Lurie is initially blind to; by working with Bev, David comes to see for himself what she saw all along. There is a great deal of philosophical interest in this possibility of learning to encounter values from someone else, by way perhaps of joint attention.

David Lurie only becomes able to seethe value that Bev teaches him to see, the value of the derelict animals that she deals with, because of the difficult and personally humiliating journey—into disgrace—that Lurie takes within the course of the novel. That the best ethical viewpoint is not always the most elevated of stations is an idea that many others have had besides Coetzee. (Perhaps especially in Coetzee’s own Judaeo-Christian tradition; though the same idea is there in Buddhism and Hinduism too.) This idea is crucial to the thinking of the protagonist of my next example of value-encounter:

While [the young St Francis of Assisi] was selling velvet and fine embroideries to some solid merchant of the town a beggar came imploring alms; evidently in a somewhat tactless manner… Francis was evidently torn two ways with the botheration of two talkers, but finished his business with the merchant somehow; and when he had finished it, found the beggar was gone. Francis leapt from his booth, left all the bales of velvet and embroidery behind him apparently unprotected, and went racing across the market-place like an arrow from the bow. Still running, he threaded the labyrinth of the narrow and crooked streets of the little town, looking for his beggar whom he eventually discovered; and loaded the astonished mendicant with money. Then he straightened himself, so to speak, and swore before God that he would never all his life refuse help to a poor man. (G.K.Chesterton, *St Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923), pp.43-44)

In the person of the beggar, the young St Francis encounters a value that he initially tries to brush off; but his awareness of it is too clear for that (6, 8). In fact, he finds himself apologising to the beggar for attempting to ignore him. In this story St Francis too (1) encounters a value which he takes to be unmistakably present (6, 8), whose presence before him is (2) none of his doing, (4) independent of anything else he values, and (3) no function of his main current projects and life-plans. It seems (9) to have been an epiphany for him, and it obviously (7) led him straight into action. (5) We might not share St Francis’s motivational structures; for all that, what he does is readily intelligible to us, and has plenty of parallels in plenty of other societies, and in our own.

For St Francis, and for millions of others before and since, as an example of how values can just *loom up* in front of us and demand that we respond to them, however inconvenient or even dangerous for us responding may be, another example—my last—is literally canonical. Here is Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37, my own translation):

At that moment a teacher of the Law stood up to try Jesus out, and said “Rabbi, what do I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus replied “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And the teacher said to him “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself.’” And Jesus said “That’s the right answer. Do this and you shall live.” But he, wanting to win the argument, asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” And in response Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among thieves. They took his clothes and beat him up and left him half-dead. Now as it happened, a priest was going down that road: he saw the man, and walked by on the other side of the road. And similarly a Levite came to the place, and saw the man, and walked by on the other side of the road. But then a traveller from Samaria came up. He saw the man and felt sorry for him, so he went over to him and bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He put the man on his own horse and took him to an inn to look after him. And the next morning he took out two denarii, gave the money to the inn-keeper, and said ‘Look after this man, and whatever you spend on him, I will compensate you for when I come back.’ Which of these three do you think turned out to be a neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?” And the teacher of the Law replied: “The one who did the act of mercy for him.” “Go then,” said Jesus, “and do likewise.”

Familiar though this story is, what it has to tell us about value-encounter is not always as clearly understood as it should be. In particular, the Samaritan’s response to the value that he encounters, in the person of the robbed man, is not to be understood as supererogatory. That is how the epithet “good Samaritan” is usually taken in contemporary applied ethics, thanks no doubt to Judith Jarvis Thomson’s violinist argument. But the story begins from the question whattheLaw(of Moses) *requires*: not what it applauds but does not strictly require. And the story ends with the injunction “Go then and do likewise”: so, what the Law requires under its love-thy-neighbour-as-thyself heading is, precisely, actions like the Samaritan’s. In between the story’s end-points, what it says about the priest and the Levite is surely not that “They do all right, though the Samaritan does better”. Jesus’ point is that the priest and the Levite do *wrong*. They are confronted by the very same reason as the Samaritan is, and unlike him they reject it or ignore it; which means that they fail to do even the minimum required.Actions like the Samaritan’s, no matter how saintly or heroic they may seem, are *demanded* of us by the Law. They are not just things that we are encouraged to do, and get bonus points on the Moral Scoresheet for doing. In a different way, no doubt Peter Singer’s famous case of the toddler who falls into a fountain is designed to make the same point—that rescues can be and often are morally mandatory, not optional.

In Section III I spoke of value*-encounter*, not of perception, though I was happy to use “see” and similar terms. If we do want to use the trope of perceiving values, then the point of this trope is not to support any particular physical or metaphysical story; rather, it is the externality, the already-there-ness—I am tempted to say, the *heteronomy*—of the values that we encounter. As I began by saying, values are the kind of things that we can bump into.

If this is how it is with our experience of value, what does that have to say about our philosophical theory of value? Can we go straight from this sort of phenomenology of value, to an outright disproof of any particular moral theory?

The short answer is No. But the most obvious reason why not shows no especial weakness in the phenomenology, and no especial strength in any particular moral theory. The reason is simply Duhemian. It is almost always possible for almost any theorist in almost any area, no matter how barmy or far-out his theory and no matter how obvious the objections to it, to avoid outright refutation by trimming either his position, or the objections, or his theory of what counts as outright refutation, or all three. Logicallycompellingrefutation is usually too much to hope for: in philosophy in general, I mean, not just in ethics. The most that is normally possible is the demonstration of tensions between positions.

Three well-known and popular philosophical positions in ethics that are in tension with recognitionalism are moral non-realism; systematic moral theory in general; and Mark LeBar’s Virtue Eudaimonism. Here I have space for a full discussion only of the third, which is the one that relates most closely to our present concern, demandingness.

(1) **Moral non-realism:** recognitionalism says that we encounter values as realities outside us, objective, observation-independent, and not shaped by our wants, preferences, or projects. Moral non-realism denies that there could be any such values. Obviously the fact that our value-experience appears to show that moral non-realism is false does not show that moral non-realism *is* false. But it does show that we must either reject moral non-realism, or refuse to take value-experience the way it evidently demands to be taken: as realistic.

(2) Similarly with **systematic moral theory**, thinking about ethics in the experiential way that I have been recommending and exploring cannot, in itself, *disprove* the systematician’s very different way of thinking about ethics. But it does bring out the sharp contrast between these two approaches.

We can think of ethics as argument, or we can think of it as perception. About arguments we ask whether they are valid, whether they are sound, elegant, informative, powerful; whether they imply paradoxes, self-refute, are widely applicable, and so on. About perceptions we ask (as above) whether they are accurate, whether they are accurately and sincerely reported, and what wider significance they have, if any. These are different lists of questions, and show a striking lack of overlap.

Making arguments is active, an application of logical and dialectical acumen; having perceptions is passive, an exercise in negative capability.[[2]](#footnote-2) To be good at making arguments you need rigour, resourcefulness, energy, an eye for an entailment or for what can be generalised; to be good at having perceptions you need sensitivity, stillness, receptivity, attention to the particular. Argument talks; perception watches. These are different skill-sets, and, again, they show a striking lack of overlap.

I don’t mean that we should not try to combine the argumentative and the perceptual. We cannot seriously accept, in its full starkness, the exclusive choice of either of them on its own: a choice between “Don’t think but look!” and “Don’t look but think!” We have no option but to try to combine them. I mean that combining them is, and is unavoidably, problematic, and that the depths of the difficulties involved have not generally been taken as seriously as they should have been by philosophers. Especially not by those—the majority—who take seriously the distinctive project and ambitions of systematic moral theory.

Negotiating this fault-line between system and perception is a daunting challenge for philosophical ethics. It is also an essential one, if there is to *be* any coherent philosophical ethics. I don’t mean that there can’t be. But I do mean that systematic moral theory typically does not negotiate that fault-line successfully.

I think some important options in philosophical ethics disappear down this fault-line; for instance, (3) Mark LeBar’s **Virtue Eudaimonism**.

To summarise with possibly-caricaturing brevity a complex, subtle, and ingenious argument, LeBar’s book *The Value of Living Well* argues for these theses:

1. All (or nearly all, or the paradigmatic) ethical reasons are reasons to act*.*
2. There is a distinction between the normative (roughly, what ethical reasons I have) and the telic (roughly, what ethical reasons I have reason to have).
3. The normative depends on the telic: the ethical reasons that I have must all pass the test of being reasons that I have reason to have.
4. ‘Normative reasons’ that are not telically mandated have no normative force at all.
5. If the normative did not depend on the telic, I would not be an *agent* relative to my own reasons; I would be *passive* relative to them.
6. Which would be intolerable.
7. Since normative pluralism is true, there can be many kinds of reasons that I have.
8. Since telic monism is true, there’s only one test for being reasons that I have reason to have.
9. This is the test of (my own) eudaimonia.
10. Hence, I have no reason to have any reasons that do not arise directly from my own eudaimonia.
11. This is what Aristotle means when he says that eudaimonia is the one supreme end.
12. The ethical life is a coherent system arranged around this one supreme end.

Except for g, I dispute every item in LeBar’s list of views. The key points are (c), (d), and (e):

Contra (c): The normative doesn’t depend on the telic nor on anything else. It’s just *there*; we don’t bring it into being by filtering our prima-facie normative reasons through the telic; we don’t bring it into being by any such kind of rational auditing process, either real or virtual.

Contra (d): ‘Normative reasons’ need have no telic mandate at all to hold with full normative force. In particular, contra (h, i, j), they need have no relation at all to the agent’s own *eudaimonia.* (Is the sergeant concerned with her own *eudaimonia* as she dives on the hand grenade? Is there something wrong with her rationality if she isn’t?[[3]](#footnote-3)) That, in a sense, is precisely the recognitionalist’s difficulty: that a reason can arise for me from an encounter with value like the good Samaritan’s, even though that reason has *nothing to do with the overall shape and purpose of my life*, and if anything, detracts from its shape and purpose; or quite possibly, as with the sergeant, *destroys* its shape and purpose.

But while this feature is a difficulty *of* recognitionalism, a practical difficulty entailed by its truth, it is not clear that it is a difficulty *for* recognitionalism, a reason to disbelieve it. Indeed, this feature might actually be an advantage of recognitionalism over a eudaimonist view like LeBar’s. The idea that every deliberative transaction I perform must pay its tribute to consideration of my own *eudaimonia*—that all my practical thinking is, in this important way, *self-referential—*can seem unattractively self-absorbed, perhaps even disturbingly like another form of self-absorption that is notorious in philosophy, the self-absorption of the stereotypical egoist. That there is no parallel way in which recognitionalism need be “all about me” surely tells in recognitionalism’s favour, not against it.

Contra (e): We are no more *passive* relative to the reasons we recognise than we are relative to the objects we see. (Again: take the perceptual trope seriously.) They’re part of the landscape we negotiate, and no doing of ours. Their not being artefacts of our agency is not a *barrier* to our being agents; it is part of what it is for us to be agents.

Hence, contra (f), there’s nothing intolerable about the passivity that recognitionalism brings. Nor, as my examples in Section III perhaps help to show, does this passivity undermine agency, as opposed to positioning it realistically in a world which we inhabit and inherit, not create.

The emerging recognitionalist picture of the shape of the values and the reasons we actually have is radically messy. Whether, in our lives, we can make a coherent shape using the materials that those values offer us, is partly up to us, and partly a matter of fortune. It is a familiar point in ethics that I might very easily find myself obliged to respond to encountered values that are far out of the course that I had set for myself, as when I am, so to speak, “ambushed” by the fact that a spouse or a child has contracted a long-term illness that is bound to require my time, money, and care. The point is less often made in ethics, perhaps because it is a more cheerful and less grimly-dutiful point, that I can also find myself “ambushed” by an encountered value, *and delighted* so to be ambushed. There are cases—real-life cases—which are very like winning the Lottery, except that the value that one acquires through them is not, or not exactly, financial: think of being bequeathed a Raphael or a Hebridean island by a total stranger, or of making a friend one didn’t expect to make, or indeed, in many cases, of falling in love. It is obviously stupid to say that a practically wise agent must reject such magnificent gifts of fortune, simply they are not part of her life’s preconceived script; simply because, with respect to them we are simply passive and vulnerable (two things that philosophers are typically rather bad at being). Yet it is not always altogether clear exactly how neo-Aristotelian accounts of the planfulness of the *phronimos*’ life are to avoid saying this.

The messiness and openness to fortune inherent in the recognitionalist picture puts it in obvious tension with LeBar’s view. But as before, the picture does not actually *refute* LeBar’s Virtue Eudaimonism, because Duhemian get-outs and add-ons are always available. Nothing prevents LeBar from saying, for instance, that while he admits the recognitionalist phenomenology, still the normative force of encountered values is illusory when it’s not telically mandated, and real when it is telically mandated—even though that normative force feels exactly the same in both cases. Or LeBar can insist—indeed, I rather think he has to insist—that the process of telic mandation need not be conscious, and can often be reduced to a counterfactual: “If the agent *had* consciously considered whether these actions/ policies/ responses of his were telically mandated, he would have concluded that they were”. Such moves can have an air of special pleading and adhockery, and there is a debate to be had about whether they reduce the very idea of telic mandation to vacuity; but there’s nothing *formally* objectionable about them.

As with non-realism and as with systematic theory in general, it is not so much that recognitionalism *refutes* LeBar, as that it suggests a quite different *vision* of agency. LeBar sees us as something like Korsgaardian self-constituters, and at the same time constituters of value. Recognitionalism suggests both that value is not at all like that—it is far too external and independent of us to be seen in the constructivist way—and also that we are not at all like that. Even when it goes well, life is simply not so clearly-organised around any such process as narrative self-construction. Or at least it does not have to be; there’s nothing *essential* about this ingredient even of the good life, let alone of the life that any individual has reason to live. *Pace* LeBar and Aristotle (or some of Aristotle; less perhaps than LeBar supposes), having a clear and coherent life-narrative is, for the recognitionalist, at most *just* *one* reasonable ambition for a practically wise life. And there are all sorts of considerations, both happy and unhappy, that might unexpectedly override it: having a disabled child, unexpectedly inheriting Colonsay, or whatever.

Recognitionalism as I have outlined it seems to raise a sceptical worry for ethics. Most sceptical worries in ethics are, as it were, of the not-enough-value variety: they have to do with the underdetermination, by the value that there seems to be (or not to be), of what we ought to do or believe. It’s like that, for instance, with Mackiean moral non-realism (“The very idea of really existing value is a mistake”), with Herodotean moral relativism (“Who’s to judge what’s right?”), with Thrasymachean moral nihilism (“Why do what is just?”), and with existentialist moral nihilism (“Why do anything at all?”). But there are also sceptical worries of the too-much-value variety, worries generated because the value that there apparently is seems to determine *too much* of what we should do and believe. Most obviously, there is the problem central to this collection, the problem of demandingness. Recognitionalism seems to have a very good chance of turning out to be an acutely demanding view of ethics.

Of course, the reservations about what reasons to act exactly we are given by any encounter with value remain in force. And there is another way in which it is formally possible to contrive a view which is recognitionalist, but very undemanding indeed: null-case recognitionalism we might call it, i.e. the view that we get by combining the recognitionalist thesis that our knowledge of value is primarily a matter of experiential encounter, with the view that little or no encounter of this sort actually happens.

But this minimalism is not what Section III’s examples suggest, and not what reflection on our own experience suggests either. The purport of Section III’s examples is that we can be given serious reason to deflect our course in life—possibly in a big, even in an irreversible way—by encounters with values such as a mere tree, or any stranger who happens to be lying mugged in a ditch, or an elephant we see being tormented in the ring, or any old stray dog who happens to cross our path. But then the values that surround us threaten to *swamp* us. The threat is not merely that value-encounter might lead us to abandon some cherished plan for our life-course, as people are familiarly deflected from their own careers and interests by the necessity of caring for ill relatives. The threat is that we might not be able to set any life-course in the first place.

I think this worry about demandingness really is an implication of recognitionalism, at least when we combine recognitionalism with familiar data about what value-encounters we actually experience, some of which can be recovered from the examples of value-encounter that I gave in Section III. By this I don’t mean to suggest a *modus tollens* against recognitionalism; my point is not that, since there is this problem, we should abandon the commitment to recognitionalism that generates it. Rather, I mean that, since recognitionalism is *true*, the problem is real and unavoidable. It should worry us. (In practice, it often does.)

There are ways of presenting the demandingness objection (locus classicus: Williams’ “Critique of Utilitarianism”) that make it sound like the point is the following simple argument:

1. Any moral theory (or outlook) that imposes very strong moral demands on agents is implausible/ absurd.
2. Theory/ outlook X imposes very strong moral demands on agents.
3. So X is implausible/ absurd.

To make anything like this simple argument work, it seems to me, we will have to avoid thinking of moral demands as based in any way in the facts. For we cannot argue against *facts* in the simple argument’s way, no matter how exigent those facts may be. To do so would be far too close for comfort to reasoning like this:

1. If, for any p, p’s truth would be grossly inconvenient to us, then p is false.
2. Proposition X’s truth would be grossly inconvenient to us.
3. So X is false.

(4-6) is a patently absurd argument, manifestly self-serving, obviously in-denial. Recognitionalism is nicely distanced from this sort of counter-intuitive laxism. It is also nicely distanced from the rather parallel Procrustean suggestion—which LeBar is close to making—that where moral demands don’t fit into some theoretical framework, they can be dismissed simply *because* they don’t fit. The price that the recognitionalist pays for avoiding these objections is the price of being, potentially, confronted by a chaos of conflicting demands: demands that are no less real for being chaotic and conflicting.

Another response would be a robust and hard-nosed insistence that most of the experiences that I’ve been describing as value-encounter are merely episodes of neurotic or sentimental emotion, and therefore misleading about what values are real. Against this, we could equally say that some responses to putative value-experience that present themselves as robust and hard-nosed dismissals of neurosis or sentimentality are actually expressions of callousness, brutishness, or insensitivity. On its own, just throwing around the words “sentimentality” and “brutishness” settles nothing; a familiar problem about the doctrine of the mean is in the offing here.

The theme of insensitivity and hypersensitivity to encountered values comes up in Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (pp.339-341). Murdoch tells us of her nice middle-class lady Gabriel “having a terrible experience”: she happens on two (implicitly) rather yobbish youths at the seaside who have caught and confined a large fish in a small and stagnant rock-pool. Gabriel is so distressed by the fish’s distress that she pleads with her husband, Brian, for money:

“Some boys have got a fish, a live fish, I want to buy it to save it—”

“Two pounds, for a fish?”

“I want to buy it, to put it back in the sea.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” said Brian, “we’re not made of money. Certainly not.”

Gabriel turned from him and ran on laboriously, her feet sinking in the sand, her face red with tears.

Gabriel’s experience certainly looks like neurotic hyper-sensitivity to value. But there again, Brian’s response could also be seen as brutish insensitivity. Murdoch’s narration of this painful small event suggests a studied ambiguity about value. It is possible to see things Brian’s shoulder-shrugging way and think that Gabriel is being silly and hysterical, and there is no value to the fish. But it is also possible (and on the whole, more plausible) to see things Gabriel’s way and think that Brian is being unkind and insensitive, and that the fish’s plight does demand a response. Thinking again through my examples in Section III, we may come to think that this ambiguity is a pervasive one. Across the board, perhaps, it is possible for us to find value in all sorts of unlikely places; but equally possible for us to brush it off or ignore it. That suggests, in turn, that the question about how sensitive we *ought* to be to possible values—which encounters we dismiss as sentimentality on our own part, and which we take to be real intimations of value—is a fundamental one, because it has implications for the whole mind-set with which we approach the world.

Here it is as if there are available to us two quite different ways of seeing the world evaluatively—but the two ways conflict *fundamentally*, and the result is an overall picture which, like an astigmatic’s visual field, is itself disjointed between those different foci. Something like the same sense of disjoined overlap can be found in a passage from the Canadian travel-writer Wade Davis, about being a timber-worker cutting down the old-growth forests of Haida Gwaii. He and another timber-worker, “a young Nisga’a from New Ayainsh”, find themselves waiting out a rainstorm together:

We shared a cigarette. I was watching his face as he smoked. It struck me as strange that we were here, huddled in the forest in silence, two young men from totally different worlds… I thought of what this country must have been like when my own grandfather arrived. I saw in the forest around us a world that my own children might never know, that Nisga’a children might never know. I turned to my partner. The whistle blew on the landing.

“What the hell are we doing?” I asked.

“Working,” he said. I watched him as he stepped back into the clearcut, and then I followed. (Wade Davis, *Shadows in the Sun* (Washington: Island Press, 1998), p.265)

If the young Nisga’a got Wade Davis’s point at all, which I suspect he didn’t, maybe he thought that Davis was being sentimental; certainly lots of people in the Canadian timber industry could be lined up to press that charge against anyone who, like Davis, sees a serious problem in the clear-cutting of the old-growth temperate rainforest of British Columbia. Here too the accusations that loggers are callous, and that tree-huggers are sentimental, do not, all on their own, get us anywhere. To decide which if either of them is right in any particular case, we need to look at the values at stake in more detail, and think out more carefully what kind of a response to them is demanded of us. That is an essentially contemplative process, a process of reflection on values and what reasons they ground for us. It is in the nature of this process that its upshot might take us in all sorts of directions, some of which, such as a radical green environmental and/or animal-rights philosophy, look very demanding indeed—but are no less real possibilities for that.

Like much else in the moral life, which values I encounter is a matter only partly under my control: I can choose which way to direct my course and my gaze, but I am also subject, in everything I do, to uncertainty and contingency. To act well requires openness to this contingency. I have to do my best with the goods that I encounter, while recognising and accepting the fact that which goods those are is very often not within my control, and that it may well be that whatever I do, something irreplaceable will be lost. Systematic moral theory, and indeed less systematic philosophical ethics of the kind assayed by, for example, Plato and Aristotle, has tended to be resistant to these facts about contingency, and to feed the notions that rational control, “independence” as Aristotle calls it, is central to everything good about agency, and hence that any real loss brought about through my agency must be really my fault, because really avoidable. If recognitionalism is right, the ideas that agents like us might even conceivably have complete rational control of their own lives, and that they might always be able to make choices free from all rational agent-regret, are dangerously misleading illusions. In truth, complete rational control is not even a part of any ethical ideal that could possibly be an ethical ideal for us; and among the things that the world contains as a result of our actions there is, unavoidably, uncompensatable loss.

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1. My second example is also in Tom Holland: Rubicon (London: Little, Brown, 2003), pp.284-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.” (John Keats, Letter to his brothers) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more about the intuitive absurdities, in particular about other-concern and self-sacrifice, that are quickly generated by the eudaimonist thesis that every reason I have must in some way be a reason to promote my own eudaimonia, see my Critical Notice of Daniel Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, forthcoming in *Ethics*. For a more general line of rousingly forthright anti-eudaimonist argument, see Augustine’s texts, helpfully summarised and ably discussed in N.Wolterstorff, “Augustine’s rejection of eudaimonism”, in James Wetzel, ed., *Augustine’s* City of God: *A Critical Guide* (CUP: Cambridge 2012), pp.149-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)